FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS AND INUIT SCHOOL-COMMUNITY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT PROJECT

PROMISING PRACTICES

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Alberta

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In March 2003, Alberta Education began preparatory work for the First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) School-Community Learning Environment Project to address a recognized achievement gap between FNMI and non FNMI learners. Implementation of the project occurred during the 2004-05 school year with the objective of addressing the needs of FNMI learners in sixteen pilot schools across Alberta. A collaborative approach among school staffs, Aboriginal parents, Elders, jurisdiction leaders, Alberta Education, and Aboriginal communities resulted in the implementation of a wide variety of innovative practices designed to improve FNMI student outcomes at individual pilot schools. The *FNMI School-Community Learning Environment Project - Promising Practices Report* (2007) highlights these promising practices in light of current research.

Current research regarding factors that contribute to First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) student success in schools has increased over the past few years with five prevalent themes emerging in relation to positive practices for success. In addition to these five themes the report reviews two additional areas that were specific to this project. One area of review was approaches to data collection inherent to the project and a second area highlighted the approaches that pilot schools used to identify barriers to success faced by their FNMI students. The report provides readers with an overview of current research with promising practices organized into the following seven areas:

Data Collection
Identification of Barriers
FNMI Parent and Community Engagement
FNMI Cultural & Language Programming
Teachers, Instruction and Curriculum/Resources
Professional Development
Individual Student Supports

The following represents an overview of common practices and approaches used by FNMI School-Community Learning Environment Project schools with more detailed information contained in the report.

Data Collection

Pilot schools developed broad-based accountability frameworks to determine their level of success in improving outcomes for their FNMI students. These frameworks incorporated achievement results, student participation and completion rates, satisfaction surveys, FNMI parental involvement and the integration of FNMI education into the ongoing programming of the school.

Identification of Barriers

Schools engaged all sectors of their FNMI community in genuine dialogue in order to identify barriers and possible approaches to improve FNMI student success.

FNMI Parent and Community Engagement

Principals

Principals play a critical leadership role in developing positive relationships with FNMI parents and the FNMI community. Being accessible, welcoming and willing to engage FNMI parents/community beyond the confines of the school are key components to developing this positive relationship.

Individual Schools – First Nations Communities

A wide variety of staff members of Pilot schools were involved in the development of enhanced relationships with First Nations communities and Métis Settlements. This requires a willingness to engage members of the community/settlement beyond the confines of the school and have these interactions be genuine, respectful and personal in nature.

Individual Schools – FNMI Parents

Pilot schools utilized a wide variety of approaches to build positive relationships with their FNMI parent community. Although many pilot schools had on-site FNMI Liaison Workers, the role of relationship building was not left solely to this person; clearly the FNMI Liaison Worker's role was to assist the staff in the development of their own relationships with FNMI parents. Schools made concerted efforts to initiate positive relationships with FNMI parents and provided flexible, supportive options for meetings. In addition, FNMI parents and community members were seen to be assets to the school community and their expertise was acknowledged and respected.

FNMI Cultural & Language Programming

Pilot Schools provided FNMI and Non-FNMI students with opportunities to appreciate the richness of FNMI culture. In addition, schools provided opportunities for students to participate in FNMI cultural programming.

Teachers, Instruction and Curriculum/Resources

Teachers

Pilot schools often utilized the skills and knowledge of their FNMI staff to provide leadership for their FNMI programs. Two school principals who provided feedback in the area of teacher qualities identified the need to attract FNMI teachers and teachers in general who were committed to improving outcomes for FNMI students, were flexible and demonstrated the ability to develop positive relationships.

Instruction

Schools emphasized the need to develop supportive, learning environments based on a climate of relationship, respect, and trust as an important first step to FNMI student success. A focus on learning and a willingness to adapt school routines to meet student needs were identified by pilot schools as practices that enrich these environments to make them truly successful.

Instructional Strategies

A willingness to attempt innovative solutions to old problems characterized pilot schools attitudes toward FNMI student needs. The use of assessment for learning strategies, differentiated instruction, and the creation of opportunities for individual and small group instruction was evident in a number of pilot schools.

Literacy

A focus on literacy was a common element in many pilot school programs. A variety of program approaches were used including guided reading, animated literacy, one to one instruction and a multi-leveled reading program.

Homework

A number of Pilot Schools identified homework completion as an area of concern for their FNMI students. Schools reviewed their homework expectations, looked closely at the realities of homework for their FNMI students, and developed ways to assist and reward students.

Resources

Pilot schools increased their FNMI resources for both teachers and students. Initiatives focused on building contemporary library collections, curricular support material, and classroom collections. The initial placement of the "FNMI School-Community Learning Environment Project Toolkit" in each pilot school provided teachers with access to a wide spectrum of FNMI professional resources.

Professional Development

Schools provided their staff members with professional development opportunities as part of this project. A number of schools were provided with professional development opportunities through the Alberta Regional Learning Consortia. The "School-Community Learning Environment Project Facilitator Professional Development Resource" developed in collaboration with project schools, provided a framework for these professional development programs.

Individual Student Supports

A number of pilot schools reported the development of leadership, mentorship and career education programs to assist FNMI students. Other schools reported increased emphasis on transition planning for their FNMI students.

1. BACKGROUND

The FNMI School-Community Learning Environment Project, completed early in 2006, is an example of the Alberta Government's continuing work with school jurisdictions to enhance learning opportunities and outcomes for FNMI learners. Past research confirms that local efforts are integral to the development of broad-based improvements in FNMI education. Alberta Education, First Nations, Métis and Inuit Services Branch's commitment to the Government of Alberta's Aboriginal Policy Framework, *Strengthening Relationships (2000)* and First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework (2002) recognizes the need to develop strategies to address the achievement gap between First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) and non FNMI students. By working together as an education community our capacity to support FNMI students is strengthened.

In March 2003, to address a recognized achievement gap between FNMI and non FNMI learners, planning and preparatory work for the First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) School-Community Learning Environment Project began. A specific implementation occurred during the 2004-05 school year with the objective of addressing the needs of FNMI learners in sixteen pilot schools across Alberta. A collaborative approach among school staffs, Aboriginal parents, Elders, jurisdiction leaders, Alberta Education staff, and Aboriginal communities resulted in the implementation of a wide variety of innovative practices designed to improve FNMI student outcomes at individual pilot schools. Throughout the project, staff from Alberta Education, FNMI Services was actively involved with individual pilot school projects on an ongoing basis to provide assistance and ascertain the progress of these innovative projects. Post test data collection was completed by pilot schools in June 2005 with pilot school final reports completed in early 2006. A final report for the project, complete with a statistical analysis of results, entitled *FNMI School - Community Learning Environment Project: Final Report (2006)* is available on the Alberta Education website.

With the submission of final pilot school reports in early 2006 the need to capture the school based innovative practices of pilot schools became a priority for FNMI services. The *FNMI School-Community Learning Environment Project - Promising Practices Report* (2007) highlights these promising practices in the light of current research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature available on factors that contribute to First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) student success in schools has increased over the past few years with five prevalent themes emerging in relation to positive practices for success. For the purposes of this literature review the most common themes are organized into the following five areas:

FNMI Parent and Community Engagement
FNMI Cultural & Language Programming
Teachers, Instruction and Curriculum/Resources
Professional Development
Individual Student Supports

2.1 FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS AND INUIT PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

In an overview of the literature regarding FNMI student success, an emphasis on the need for strong working partnerships between the school and FNMI parents/community occurs frequently. In a study of 162 small high schools in Alaska, Kleinfield (1985) noted that successful schools exhibit strong teacher/community partnerships, teacher/community agreements on the theme for the educational programs, an enterprising teaching staff, and a central office that encourages adapting schooling to local needs.

Mcinerney et al. (1997) rates the importance of relationships and family in schooling for FNMI students as high in the following statement: "It is clear from the interviews that the most important influence on school motivation was the family. Teachers were rated second most important and peers were the third ". Family involvement in school increases FNMI students' chances for educational success (p.14).

Melnechenko and Horsman (1998) note the influence of the family as a large determiner in FNMI student success. The authors say that "Educators have come to know that there is a positive correlation between success at school and positive family influence, support, and relationship" (p.9). Bazylak (2002) concludes that "Without family involvement Aboriginal students are less likely to succeed in school" (p. 139). Bell (2004) in his study of ten FNMI schools in Canada states, "The establishment of effective working partnerships between schools, parents and communities is dependent on the formation of a climate of relational trust. Additionally, previous education experiences of parents or community members strongly influence the potential of the school to build effective partnerships. This is particularly significant, given that many Aboriginal communities have had negative experiences in which education was used as a tool of assimilation" (p.35).

Clearly schools that can engage FNMI parents/community and develop positive, supportive relationships are more likely to produce positive outcomes for their Aboriginal students.

2.2 ABORIGINAL CULTURAL & LANGUAGE PROGRAMMING

FNMI culture and language programs are becoming increasingly common in Alberta schools. A number of schools throughout the province offer second language instruction in First Nations' languages such as Cree and Blackfoot. Considerable effort has been directed to develop resources and support the implementation of these programs. In addition, a number of schools in the province offer FNMI cultural experiences for students both FNMI and Non-FNMI. Research tells us that a high level of congruency between the school environment and the language and the culture of the school's community is critical to the success of formal learning (Barnhardt, 1990).

Demmert (2001) notes that " Studies conducted in the past 30 years collectively provide strong evidence that native language and cultural programs—and student identification with such programs—are associated with improved academic performance, decreased dropout rates, improved school attendance rates, decreased clinical symptoms, and improved personal behavior". The presence of culture and language programs in schools is seen as less alien and local people are more inclined to become involved in the education process (McLaughlin, 1992).

There is considerable research indicating the positive effects of FNMI bilingual and immersion programs. Case studies in three separate Alaskan communities with schools offering bilingual or bicultural classes showed satisfied parents, excellent student attitudes and excellent test scores (McBeath, McDiarmid, & Shepro, 1982). A study of four Indigenous language programs in New Zealand and Hawaii also produced similar results with decreased dropout rates, increased sense of heritage and identity and improved test scores (Stiles, 1997).

Schools that include cultural and language programming for their FNMI students capitalize on a powerful positive practice supported by current literature.

2.3 TEACHERS, INSTRUCTION AND CURRICULUM/RESOURCES

2.3.1 Teachers

As is the case with all students, classrooms that offer FNMI students engaging educational experiences provide greater opportunities for success. Clearly the most important component of this educational experience is the teacher. Bazylak (2002) notes that teachers who are able to build strong, healthy relationships built on trust and mutual respect play a significant role in the success of FNIM students. This importance is echoed by Welnechenko and Horsman (1998) in their study of factors that contribute to FNMI student success in school in grades 6 to 9. They maintain that "relationship-building is a prerequisite to a positive classroom environment" (p.12).

Cleary and Peacock (1998) describe successful methods and teacher behaviors that work with Indigenous students as including: the need to build trust; to connect with the community; to establish cultural relevance in the curriculum; to tap intrinsic motivation

for learning; to use humor; to establish family support; to provide situations that yield small successes; to make personal connections with students; to use highly engaging, activity-based learning and, in some cases, cooperative learning; to provide role models; to be flexible, fair, and consistent; and to provide a real audience and purpose for student work.

McBride & McKee (2001) in reviewing highly successful school jurisdictions in British Columbia noted those districts encouraged teachers to reach out to the FNMI community, recognize cultural diversity within the school culture, and to have expectations for FNMI students in keeping with all other students (p.61). Cajete, (1999) notes that "recognizing the core cultural value structure of students becomes a powerful learning aid if teachers use this insight into their students' minds and lives in creative and constructive ways" (p.6).

For example, a cultural principle often practiced by many First Nation and Métis communities includes the principle of non-interference. (Garrett, 1995) defines non-interference as "The highest form of respect for another person is respecting his or her natural right to self-determination." This means not interfering with another person's ability to choose, even when it is to keep that person from doing something foolish or dangerous. Non-interference means caring in a respectful way (p.190). Non-interference also means permitting an individual to speak without interruption and to reflect on what has been said before speaking. In the classroom, direct and damaging personal criticism in front of others may be considered rude and disrespectful and can lead to 'loss of face' and complete withdrawal and alienation by the student.

Teachers with low expectations for their FNMI students are seen as having a detrimental impact on the success of FNMI students. Digman, Mroczka, and Brady (1995) note that low teacher expectations and counseling of FNMI students into vocationally oriented curricula have been identified as factors contributing to student attrition (p. 10). Bazylak (2002) in a study of successful FNMI high school students observe that "the participants revealed high teacher expectations as a factor that encouraged their success in school" but qualified this by indicating that the teacher needed to ensure there was room for flexibility in their expectations (p.147).

In addition to the successful characteristics explained above, research also suggests that FNMI teachers can play an important role in the educational success of FNMI youth. Mackay and Myles (1995), in a discussion of FNMI student retention and dropout rates, identify FNMI teachers and/or assistants as an important support for FNMI students in high school. The authors note that "schools in which Native students enjoy a high rate of success are those with principals who actively promote strategies for maximizing the academic success of all their students. The principals of such schools have successfully recruited Native teachers and/or assistants" (p.174). Kanu (2003) in a study of teacher' perceptions of the integration of FNMI culture into the high school curriculum also notes the unique contribution FNMI teachers /assistants made toward meaningful integration of FNMI perspectives. The author concluded: "The

provincial government must work in concert with faculties of education to put more effort and resources into the training and hiring of Aboriginal teachers" (p. 63).

Schools that hire teachers who have high/flexible expectations and are able to build strong, healthy relationships with their students built on trust and mutual respect have a greater chance of success in the education of their FNMI students. In addition to the successful characteristics noted above, research suggests that FNMI teachers can play an important role in the educational success of FNMI youth.

2.3.2 Instruction

Demmert (2001) wrote:

> "Successful classroom teachers are able to organize their classes and adjust their teaching strategies in a way that motivates, engages, and challenges students to learn. An often unrecognized factor that influences these organizational skills and teaching strategies is the cultural context in which learning takes place. A growing body of research reports on the positive aspects of including the language and cultural base of the Native community served as a necessary characteristic of successful schools" (p.18).

Other researchers look more specifically at instructional factors that have a positive influence on FNMI student achievement. Brancov (1994) suggests an informal classroom organization, culturally relevant material and group work produced positive results. McCarty (1991) observes that changing the classroom learning environment to support open-ended questioning, inductive/analytic reasoning, and student participation in a cultural context resulted in increased student participation. In addition, flexible furniture arrangements, group work, shared locus of control by teachers and pupils, cooperative learning, collaborative group work and increased opportunities for dialogue all have been identified as having a positive impact on Aboriginal student success.

Garrett (2003) in discussing the cultural discontinuity of Native American students in schools in the United States has the following suggestions to improve instructional practice:

- Introduce more opportunities for visual and oral learning styles.
- Use culturally relevant materials when possible.
- Respect family and tribe-related absences.
- Invite Native American mentors, such as elders from the community.
- Encourage peer tutoring and cooperative group learning approaches to emphasize cooperation and sharing.
- Practice inter-group competition (rather than individual competition) in the classroom.
- Stress short-term goals oriented more to the present with traditional Native students.

- Model behaviors and skills, with an emphasis on personal choice, to help Native American students distinguish which behaviors are appropriate for which situation (p.233).

Garrett offers the following advice to school service professionals working with Native youth; "determine (a) the degree of cultural commitment; (b) whether the youth comes from a reservation or rural or urban setting; and (c) what tribal structure, customs, and beliefs are relevant to the situation in order to determine the presence and magnitude of cultural discontinuity (p. 233).

Classrooms that have culturally relevant materials, are informal in nature, encourage cooperative learning /group work, support open-ended questioning, inductive/analytic reasoning and student participation, produce positive results for their FNMI students.

Understanding and integrating an FNMI epistemology (ways of learning and knowing) includes the utilization of First Nations, Métis and Inuit approaches to teaching and learning which have shown to be effective in improving learning opportunities for all students (Riecken,2006), (Tharp, 2006). This holistic approach to learning requires the acknowledgement of all the facets of the person. Instruction in this context considers the person's emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual needs. A key component of FNMI education is the concept of spirituality. Spirituality, also referred to as the FNMI "Worldview", is a core component that guides this approach to education (Van Hamme, 1996). In addition, more emphasis placed on learning through observation and active student involvement provides time for students to think and answer when they are ready. Steven, (2006) noted that by tapping into traditional learning techniques, FNMI and non-FNMI students excelled academically in addition to developing a deeper sense of and respect for the native culture.

Schools that adopt and utilize a First Nations, Métis and Inuit epistemology provide an opportunity for all students to succeed.

2.3.3 Curriculum/Resources

The lack of FNIM cultural knowledge and perspectives in the school curriculum and among teachers has been identified as a significant factor in school failure, promoting calls for the inclusion of FNMI cultural perspective across school curricula and teacher education programs (Binda, 2001: McAlpine, 2001). Considerable work has been undertaken by Alberta Education in order to provide classroom teachers with culturally appropriate FNIM content across the curriculum. Currently the "infusion of FNMI perspectives" is underway in a wide variety of curricular areas including Social Studies and Science. The Aboriginal Studies 10/20/30 (Alberta Education) program provides Alberta high schools with a unique opportunity to provide a meaningful, 'culturally relevant' program to their FNMI and Non-FNMI students.

Kanu (2005) in a study of the integration of FNMI culture into the high school curriculum concurs with current initiatives in Alberta stating; "Curriculum development

units must include FNMI culture, content, issues, topics and perspectives as an integral part of the school curriculum in every subject area" (p. 12).

Aikenhead and Huntley (1999) further suggest that teachers who want to help FNMI students through the integration of FNMI perspectives into the school curriculum must be provided with the appropriate instructional resources to do so.

Starnes (2006) succinctly expresses this sentiment in the following comment; "Whether the approach is referred to as culturally responsive, "nativized," place-based, culturally infused , or "bottom-up," an astonishing amount of data illustrates that when students' culture is "tapped" in the classroom, it "build(s) a bridge to school success" (p.3).

The infusion of FNMI culture, issues and perspectives across the curriculum and access to appropriate instructional resources to support this infusion are integral to FNMI student success.

2.4 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Current research in FNMI education recognizes that the majority of teachers feel ill-prepared to meet the emerging demands regarding the education of FNMI students. Starnes (2006) discusses lessons learned as a white teacher teaching Indian children on the Chippewa-Cree reservation in northern Montana and explains;

> "The first (lesson) is how very little we know about the ways Native American children learn. We don't recognize the chasm that exists between their needs and our traditionally accepted curricula and methods. The second is how difficult it is for even the most skilled and dedicated white teachers to teach well when we know so little about the history, culture, and communities in which we teach – and when what we do know has been derived from a white education. In such cases, solid teaching skills, good intentions, hard work, and loving the kids just aren't enough. There is too much we don't know about teaching Native American children, and what we don't know definitely hurts them" (p.2).

Although there is an increase in culturally appropriate content available to teachers there has been little research on teachers' perceptions of the integration of FNMI cultural knowledge and perspectives into school curriculum. Kanu (2005) in a study of ten high school teachers' perceptions of the integration of FNMI cultural knowledge and perspectives into the teaching of the Manitoba high school curriculum notes that: "Although these teachers were unanimous in their agreement that the social studies curriculum was assimilating FNMI students through omission or token additions of FNMI perspectives, they unwittingly contributed to this process of assimilation by

allowing the curriculum topics, not FNMI issues/perspective, to remain at the center of their teaching. The teachers perceived integration as occasionally adding FNMI perspectives, where convenient, to a curriculum that remained largely Eurocentric." (p.6)

Kanu (2005) provides ten recommendations to assist policymakers and educators to successfully integrate FNMI perspectives into curriculum, the first recommendation being school and faculties of education should provide opportunities for all teachers, non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal alike, to learn about Aboriginal culture, issues, and perspectives. This is best done through pre-service teacher education program and in schools, through professional development opportunities for practicing teachers, and the utilization of the expertise of Aboriginal community members. In both routes, priority should be given to educating teachers about Aboriginal issues, Aboriginal pedagogical practices and social interaction patterns, particular ways that various groups of Aboriginal students best learn background knowledge about Aboriginal students in teachers' classrooms, and support systems for Aboriginal student learning in the public school system (p. 12).

> Clearly, to be successful, schools require access to superior professional development programs that engage teachers in meaningful experiences regarding FNMI culture, issues, and perspectives.

2.5 INDIVIDUAL STUDENT SUPPORTS

Planning for student transitions and ongoing services to individuals within the school setting are important factors to FNMI student success. Reyhner (1992) reviewed research regarding drop out rates of FNMI students and notes that dropout prevention includes support services outside of the classroom from school administrators and counselors who work closely with parents. Schools across Alberta provide a service safety net to assist students with a wide variety of issues ranging from frequent transitions, to issues of poverty and school alienation. Approaches include extensive transition planning, on-site counseling and social work, leadership and mentorship programming and the utilization of a holistic approach to the education. These interventions are important to ensure success for FNMI students.

2.5.1 Transition Planning

Many FNMI students struggle with transitions from one educational level to the next; from rural to urban settings; from one school to another; and the initial transition from home to early childhood programs. St. Germaine, (1995) linked high drop out rates of FNMI students at the high school level in America to obstacles faced during the transition to these schools. The author supports the notion that a cultural discontinuity exists for students raised and schooled in a distinctive culture of their own being thrust into a school system that promotes the values of the majority culture. If the resulting clash of cultures continues, the minority child may feel forced to choose one culture at the expense of the other.

This is often the situation in Alberta where FNMI students attend on-reserve schools for elementary and junior high school years and then move to a provincial school for the high school years. Wilson (1991) in a study of Canadian FNMI students observes that "upon entering the large predominantly white high school, they (Aboriginal students) faced racial prejudice, isolation, low expectations of teachers, and a structure which appeared to them to have been designed for their failure, and they failed, practically overnight" (p. 371). St. Germaine (1995) advises educators to:

- Avoid large comprehensive high schools
- Encourage positive teacher-student interactions
- Recruit more Aboriginal teachers
- Encourage active learning strategies where students are encouraged to interact with peers, instructors, and their environment
- Use a culturally relevant curriculum
- Use assessment for learning approaches
- Hold high expectations
- Increase parental involvement.

The Australian education system, like our Alberta system is seeking appropriate strategies to enhance the learning and teaching of Aboriginal students. Dockett (2004) in a study of successful transitions to school of young Aboriginal students in the Australian "Starting School Research Project" describes a common desire on the part of Aboriginal parents for their children which encourages a positive start to school and instills enthusiasm to succeed at school. The author notes that Aboriginal children and families can approach this transition as not merely a one-way journey towards something better, but a period of two way interactions ensuring that the child's culture is not left behind. Dockett (2004) provides the following list of elements of schools that supports this first transition from home to school:

- A visible FNMI presence at the school.
- Opportunities to express and maintain their Aboriginal identity.
- Strategies to invite families and communities into the school and value their involvement.
- Flexibility to encourage family-school connections.
- Respect for Aboriginal families and the strengths they embody.
- Access to mainstream educational curricula, complemented by opportunities to engage with Aboriginal languages and culture.
- High expectations of the learning capabilities of Aboriginal children.
- Flexibility of organization.
- Access to appropriate health services.
- Opportunities to view school as a worthwhile and positive place.

2.5.2 Poverty

Many FNMI students are faced with issues associated with poverty that impede their success at school. School Administrators, counselors, FNMI liaison workers and school based social workers are well aware of the impact of poverty on FNMI students and many schools go beyond a narrow definition of education to assist students and families. St. Germaine (1995) in reviewing drop -out rates among American Indian and Alaska Native students concludes that a significant factor in the high drop out rate, beyond cultural discontinuity for these students, was the conflict caused by maintaining societal arrangements that produce substantial poverty within a nation of affluence and concentrate such poverty in certain groups, including American Indians and Alaska Natives.

2.5.3 Developing a Sense of Belonging

Sherman & Sherman, (1990) make a case for the development of school environments that are personal in nature, with small class and program size, low pupil-teacher ratios, program autonomy, and a supportive school environment to decrease student dropout rates. The authors note that many students who have not met with success in the regular school program have been alienated by large, bureaucratic systems that do not respond to their unique needs. Reyhner (1992) suggests that smaller schools can allow a greater percentage of students to participate in extra-curricular activities. Students participating in these activities, especially sports when excessive travel is not required, drop out less frequently. Reyher (1992) goes on to suggest that it is essential that schools working with FNMI students need to recruit teachers that take an individual interest in their students and are warm, supportive and caring in nature. When classroom environments are inviting and respectful of First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultural values, students are more likely to be successful.

A significant factor to student success is creating a classroom where students believe they belong ((Whitbeck, 2001) and (Coggins, 1997)

2.5.4 Mentorship Programs

Jackson (2003) in reviewing the reasons for the success of fifteen Native American college students highlighted the positive impact of structured mentoring programs that connected advanced Native American students with beginning students. This may be another means of addressing the potential isolation of Native American students on campuses. The authors found that structured mentoring programs had the potential to mitigate the potentially negative influences of friends and provided students with role models for reconciling the conflicting pressures inherent in developing a bicultural identity.

2.5.5 Elders

Elders are a great source of cultural, community and family information. In addition they can provide support to behavior modification programs for students (Kanu, 2002). Auger (1997) noted that "Just as there are many roots forming the foundation of one tree, so are there many Elders, each one distinct in his or her own right and with his or her own knowledge, forming the foundation of Sakaw Cree traditional education. Through lifelong experience, our Elders are our knowledge-carriers; through their wisdom and spiritual insights, they are our knowledge definers" (p. 332). Many Elders hold highly respected positions because of their earned wisdom. They are considered to be the knowledge keepers, making them master teachers of the values and mores of our children. It is a natural transition to have Elders involved in the education of children.

Planning for student transitions and ongoing services to individuals within the school setting are important factors to FNMI student success. Transition planning, Elders, on-site counseling and social work, leadership and mentorship programs are examples of wrap around services that support FNMI learners.

3. IDENTIFIED PRACTICES

Pilot schools within the School-Community Learning Environment Project (SCLEP) reported a wide variety of initiatives to improve outcomes for their FNMI students. The following is a listing of some of these initiatives that were seen as producing positive results. The list identifies school practices with duplications removed. A "Common Elements" statement regarding the commonalities among the positive practices has been placed at the end of each section.

3.1 DATA COLLECTION AND IDENTIFICATION OF BARRIERS

3.1.1 Data Collection

Pilot schools were provided with an accountability framework as part of the SCLEP project with specific measures and opportunities to add their own local measures.

Accountability Measures:

- Provincial Achievement Test and Diploma Exam results.
- Canadian Test of Basic Skills Results
- FNMI student attendance rates
- % of students that graduate
- % of students that complete their grade level
- Student, Parent, Teacher and Elder Questionnaire Results
- Number of School events with an FNMI cultural component
- % of students and parents participating in FNMI cultural events
- % of FNMI students using services of FNMI Liaison workers (where applicable)
- % of FNMI students participating in extracurricular sports, social and cultural activities
- % of staff that participated in FNMI related PD activities.
- Number of FNMI community agencies involved with the school
- %of staff using resources specifically designed to enhance FNMI student success
- Barriers to FNMI student success are identified and described
- Strategies are developed to address identified barriers

Participating pilot schools established baseline information and corresponding targets for each measure.

Locally Developed Measures

The following locally developed measures were reported by Pilot schools to capture other areas of FNMI program growth.

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- IPP goal achievement/participation rates of FNMI special needs students.
- FNMI student participation rates in outreach programs
- FNMI student participation rate in the schools social activities

- FNMI parent involvement in school activities and day to day interactions (attendance at activities/interviews, volunteering, visits).
- The level of integration of FNMI education into the overall school program (FNMI Professional Development opportunities, Aboriginal language programming, cultural presentations, curriculum and curriculum materials, etc.)

> **Common Elements** - Pilot schools developed broad based accountability frameworks to determine their level of success in improving outcomes for their FNMI students. These frameworks incorporated achievement results, student participation/completion rates, satisfaction surveys, FNMI parental involvement and the integration of FNMI education into the ongoing programming of the school.

3.1.2 Identification of Barriers

Pilot schools employed a number of approaches to gain information regarding barriers to FNMI student success that existed within their environments, the following is a listing of some of these approaches:

- The principal was identified as being a key person in engaging the FNMI community in the identification of barriers to FNMI student success within individual schools.

Individual Principals:

- Personally engaged parents and the leadership of First Nation Communities to identify and address issues and barriers to success.
- Informally collected and amalgamated ideas and suggestions from the FNMI community. These discussions took place at community events, home visits, and parent - teacher interviews.
- Conducted informal discussions with representatives of local agencies that serve the FNMI community (AADAC, Justice, Children's Services, Mental Health Services, First Nations On-reserve service providers).
- In a number of schools the FNMI Liaison Worker was given the task of soliciting input from FNMI students, parents and community members as part of their ongoing work with these groups.
- A number of pilot schools held meetings with FNMI parents to discuss barriers.
- Teachers, support staff informally talked to FNMI students about their needs and supports required.
- School administration and staff observed and reflected on their FNMI student needs and identified what they felt were barriers.
- Regular monthly meetings of a FNMI steering committee composed of the school principal, school FNMI coordinator, school division FNMI coordinator, and FNMI Community representatives were held. Agendas, reports and other significant activity information were sent to key stakeholders on a monthly basis.

- A pilot school jurisdiction formed FNMI Student Success Committee with representation from schools with a high FNMI population to assist in developing jurisdictional plans to address the needs of FNMI students.

In schools with student populations from First Nations communities a number of approaches were used to provide opportunities for input:

- The school held a meeting with parents and First Nation leaders at the First Nation community to discuss how schools could be more supportive of FNMI learners.
- School personnel made formal presentations to the councils of First Nations Community.
- A formal consultation meeting was held with representation from each First Nations community and Métis settlement, school board, elders, principal, teacher, FNMI liaison, FNMI School Council member, superintendent, assistant superintendents, students, parents and Alberta Education / FNMI Services representatives to discuss barriers and potential approaches.

Common Elements - Pilot schools engaged all sectors of their FNMI community in genuine dialogue in order to identify barriers and possible approaches to improve FNMI student success.

3.2 FNMI PARENT AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
Pilot School Approaches

3.2.1 The Principal

The Principal was once again identified as being a key individual in the engagement of FNMI parents and communities. Some promising approaches of individual principals were as follows:

- Developed a group of about twenty FNMI parents that provided ongoing advice (usually one to one). Not all provided input on each issue – very loose organization.
- Made regular good news phone calls home to develop positive relationships with parents.
- Was available to parents without the need for an appointment.
- Made home visits or met parents at neutral sites (coffee shop etc.)
- Scheduled "Tea and Bannock Socials" with parents on a regular basis.
- Increased administrative time to allow themselves time to establish relationships with Parent community.
- Created a FNMI steering committee composed of the school principal, school FNMI coordinator, school division FNMI coordinator, and FNMI Community representatives. Agenda's and reports and other significant activity information set to key stakeholders on a monthly basis.

Common Elements- Principals play a critical leadership role in developing positive relationships with FNMI parents and the FNMI community. Being accessible, welcoming and willing to engage FNMI parents/community beyond the confines of the school are key components to developing this positive relationship.

3.2.2 Schools Engaged First Nations Communities

Pilot Schools that received students from First Nation Communities and Métis Settlements developed strategies to enhance their relationship with these communities. Some of these strategies were:

- A number of pilot schools invited Elders/community members from the First Nation Community to provide cultural in-services to staff members.
- Schools celebrated cultural festivities and traditions through Dance, Music, Drumming and other cultural events involving and inviting parents and community members.

Individual Schools:

- Hired liaison staff that was familiar with the local First Nations Communities for ease of acceptance.
- Arranged for a tour of the First Nation Community and spent some time in the community itself.
- Held informal gatherings without a specific agenda at the First Nation Community (seemed to have the best results in terms of participation and satisfaction).
- Arranged to meet with individual parents at the Band Office on-reserve on occasion rather than always at the school.
- Held a monthly lunch hour FNMI Parent gatherings either at the school or at the Band Office on-reserve.
- Provided a curriculum night at the First Nation Community.
- Staff from the school visited the First Nation community and participated in community events.
- Hosted community/family events at the school or in the First Nations Community and inviting everyone to participate.
- Invited all members of the First Nations community to participate in school events such as: Suicide Prevention Workshop, Career days etc.
- Hosted cultural and inspirational presentations and workshops featuring FNMI parents, elders, FNMI leadership and role models for FNMI and non-FNMI learners.
- Staff from the school participated in the First Nation's Community functions, events and gatherings.
- Established a partnership with social agencies both on and off reserves to better serve FNMI students attending provincial schools.
- Developed a communication protocol to establish a working relationship with First Nation Education authorities.

- Developed a working relationship with the Métis settlement's social services group that provided after school tutoring for students from the settlement.
- The First Nation Education Authority identified a contact person to assist the school with planning, parent contact and organization of functions, meetings, etc.
- In partnership with the Métis settlement a series of role modeling events were held for the students and parents, (example: Tom Jackson held a workshop and an evening concert).

Common Elements – A wide variety of staff members of Pilot schools were involved in the development of enhanced relationships with First Nations communities and Métis Settlements. This requires a willingness to engage members of the community/settlement beyond the confines of the school and have these interactions be genuine, respectful and personal in nature.

3.2.3 Schools engaged FNMI Parents

Individual Pilot Schools identified a number of approaches that they developed to provide ongoing opportunities for parent engagement some of these practices were:

- A common practice among pilot schools was to use their FNMI Liaison Worker to develop relationship with the FNMI parent community through home visits and invitations to "drop in" to the school on an ongoing basis.
- At a number of pilot schools, parent/teacher interviews were provided at a variety of times and formats to encourage parent involvement (example: One set of parent teacher interviews per year were held on the First Nation Community).
- Pilot schools encouraged their FNMI students to invite their parents to attend school events.
- A number of schools provided babysitting for parent meetings.

<u>Individual Schools:</u>

- Classroom teachers were asked to contact each FNMI parent early in the school year to share a positive piece of information about their child.
- The school had two or three FNMI parents on School Council (very flexible group, meet every second month).
- Provided bus transportation to parents of the First Nations Community in order for interviews and concerts etc.
- Developed a listing of FNMI Parents that were available to provide classroom presentations.
- Provided an orientation for FNMI parents at the beginning of each school year.
- Invited FNMI parents to accompany teaching staff to conferences.
- Provided tips for parents in monthly newsletters.
- Held an annual welcome and potluck dinner.
- Identified key FNMI parents and enlisted their participation on the school council and parent/teacher groups.

- The school sent periodic information to parents/guardians about the support available to FNMI students at the school.
- Held a supper meeting for FNMI parents to create an environment for discussion and tried to develop a better understanding of FNMI parents' desires for their children.
- Invited parents/guardians by letter, school newsletter and phone calls to attend meetings, open houses, teacher interviews as well as special occasion dinners and pancake breakfasts at the school featuring FNMI learner progress and celebrating FNMI culture and traditions.

Common Elements - Pilot schools utilized a wide variety of approaches to build positive relationships with their FNMI parent community. Although many pilot schools had on-site FNMI Liaison Workers, the role of relationship building was not left solely to this person; clearly the FNMI Liaison Worker's role was to assist the staff in the development of their own relationships with FNMI parents. Schools made concerted efforts to initiate positive relationships with FNMI parents and provided flexible, supportive options for meetings. In addition, FNMI parents and community members were seen to be assets to the school community and their expertise was acknowledged and respected.

3.3 FNMI CULTURAL & LANGUAGE PROGRAMMING

The vast majority of Pilot schools provided FNMI and non-FNMI students with a variety of cultural presentations as part of their FNMI program. A number of schools also went on to provide opportunities for students to become involved in cultural participation programs throughout the school year. First Nations language programs were made available for students in a limited number of pilot schools with one school offering a Cree Bilingual program at the Kindergarten and grade one level. A number of pilot schools:

- Provided a variety of FNMI cultural events to all students.
- Incorporated First Nations, Métis and Inuit community events into the school programs and calendar.
- Incorporated of FNMI culture into curricula
- Provided after school cultural programs/teaching to students: (example: traditional dance instruction)

Common Elements - Pilot Schools provided FNMI and Non-FNMI students with opportunities to appreciate the richness of FNMI culture. In addition, schools provided opportunities for students to participate in FNMI cultural programming.

3.4 TEACHERS, INSTRUCTION AND CURRICULUM/RESOURCES

3.4.1 Pilot School Approaches to Teachers

Specific data regarding pilot school principals' staff selection criteria was not collected as part of the School-Community Learning Environment Project although it was observed that Pilot Schools with FNMI staff utilized the talents, skills, cultural knowledge and experience of these individuals for leadership in their FNMI programming.

Two principals of pilot schools were interviewed as part of a related study and their key responses to this topic are noted below.

- That they were actively looking to recruit FNMI teaching and support staff
- They wanted to attract staff that were familiar with the local First Nations community
- That they were looking for teachers that could speak a First Nation language
    - They looked for teaching staff that:
        - were committed to FNMI Education and FNMI students,
        - demonstrated ability to develop relationships with others,
        - indicated a collaborative nature.

An additional approach was noted:

- One school indicated that it was interested the possibility of teaching exchanges with its neighboring First Nation schools.

Common Elements -Pilot schools often utilized the skills and knowledge of their FNMI staff in providing leadership for their FNMI programs. Two school principals who provided feedback in the area of teacher qualities identified the need to attract FNMI teachers and teachers in general who were committed to improving outcomes for FNMI students, were flexible and demonstrated the ability to develop positive relationships.

3.4.2 Pilot School Approaches to Instruction

Pilot schools made efforts to improve their instructional approaches to meet the needs of their FNMI student population. The following are the efforts of individual pilot schools to refocus and improve instruction.

<u>Individual Schools:</u>

- Felt an initial emphasis should be on creating an atmosphere of safety, trust and respectful relationships.
- Reviewed their current practices and developed higher expectations for students.
- Taught students to respect and accept differences.
- Focused on learning, and the completion of the curriculum.
- Altered the school start time to reduce lateness.

- Provided flexible timetabling to extend Language Arts periods.
- Created a daily uninterrupted two hour literacy period.
- Developed an attendance incentive program.
- Offered orientation programs for new students.
- Offered peer support, mentorship and tutorials.
- Offered cross-cultural activities and programming.

Common Elements – Pilot schools emphasized the need to develop supportive, learning environments based on a climate of relationship, respect, and trust as an important first step to FNMI student success. A focus on learning and a willingness to adapt school routines to meet student needs were identified by pilot schools as practices that enrich these environments to make them truly successful.

3.4.3 Pilot School Approaches to Instructional Strategies

A variety of instructional strategies were reported by pilot schools these included the following:

Individual Schools:

- Increased the focus on vocabulary understanding and usage.
- Employed peer learning where students were teamed with others to promote collaboration.
- Increased FNMI content and perspectives throughout the curriculum.
- Assisted students to "catch up" if they are away from school. Students were not dumped into a classroom when they retuned but were provided with individual attention to prepare them for reentry.
- Provided additional support teachers to work with small groups of FNMI students on required skills.
- Developed the Kikway Kikiskiyitin program, performance assessment strategies in Reading and Math. (Grouard Northland School).
- Used an "Assessment for Learning" approach to determine student needs. Teachers used assessment results for program planning.
- Developed a differentiated instruction approach to meet individual needs of students.
- Provided one to one services to students when required.
- Supported alternative delivery strategies in high schools.
- Developed funding sources for off-site curriculum related programs.

Common Elements –A willingness to attempt innovative solutions to old problems characterized Pilot schools attitudes toward FNMI student needs. The use of "assessment for learning" strategies, differentiated instruction, and the creation of opportunities for individual and small group instruction was evident in a number of pilot schools.

3.4.4 Pilot School Approaches to Literacy

A number of pilot schools made literacy a priority for their FNMI students and enacted a variety of Literacy programs to achieve this goal. A variety of approaches were reported by pilot schools these included the following

Individual Schools:

- Focused on early literacy and emphasized reading, spelling and writing in all grades.
- Set aside two hours of uninterrupted time each day for literacy instruction.
- Supported students in classrooms and provide one to one assistance to students based on need.
- Developed an extensive multi-level reading program and resources that allow for students to operate in the same room at a variety of skill levels.
- Provided guided reading in classrooms.
- Used an Animated Literacy approach.
- Developed an early reading program in the school and hired an early literacy co-coordinator to assist with home visits and material preparation. Directed at K-3 students.
- Found academic FNMI tutors.
- Provided extra support for students at lunch time.

Common Elements – A focus on literacy was a common element in many pilot school programs. A variety of program approaches were used including guided reading, animated literacy, one to one instruction and a multi-leveled reading program.

3.4.5 Pilot School Approaches to Homework

Homework was identified as an area of focus for a number of pilot schools. Common to these schools was the realization that the school needed to look closely at the issues associated with homework for their FNMI students, seriously evaluate the purposes for giving homework and look at innovative approaches that would assist FNMI students to accomplish this task. Some individual school approaches were as follows:

- Assigned homework during the week – not weekends.
- Made homework rooms/areas available to students on a voluntary basis before and after school.
- Provided a quiet place for students to complete their homework.
- Developed a homework voucher system to reward students who had their homework completed.
- Worked in collaboration with the First Nations Band to establish a supervised homework club at the arena (on reserve) each night for about one hour as students waited to transfer buses. Staffed by the First Nation Band.
- Band offered a tutoring service in Math and Reading at the community arena in conjunction with the supervised homework club.

- Communicated regularly with parents regarding homework.
- School wide homework program with information sessions for parents on how best to help their children succeed in school.

Common Elements –A number of Pilot Schools identified homework completion as an area of concern for their FNMI students. Schools reviewed their homework expectations, looked closely at the realities of homework for their FNMI students, and developed ways to assist and reward students.

3.4.6 Pilot School Approaches to Curriculum/Resources

All pilot schools utilized some of the project funding to increase the number of FNMI resources in their environments, including library resources and curriculum support resources. Pilot schools reported that they:

- Purchased contemporary FNMI resources to support instruction.
- Increased the FNMI resource collection for the library.
- Compiled a list of high quality FNMI websites and distributed this information to FNMI students.
- Purchased a wide variety of FNMI sensitive books, audios, videos and other relevant literatures to enrich classroom instruction and to support literacy initiatives.
- Infused FNMI perspectives into curriculum and support for new provincial initiatives in Social Studies and other content areas.
- Developed large bins of leveled FNMI resources that were made available for guided reading (sets of ten) - Eagle Crest Books – used in the classrooms.
- Purchased FNMI novels and other resources for classrooms.
- Highlighted FNMI publications in school library.
- Developed Junior High "Aboriginal Studies" units in junior high social studies program.
- Introduced Aboriginal Studies 10/20/30.
- A number of pilot schools indicated that they utilized the "*FNMI School-Community Learning Environment Project Toolkit" (Alberta Education)* as a resource guide

Common Elements –Pilot schools increased their FNMI resources for both teachers and students. Initiatives focused on building contemporary library collections, curricular support material, and classroom collections. The initial placement of the "FNMI School-Community Learning Environment Project Toolkit" in each pilot school provided teachers with access to a wide spectrum of FNMI professional resources.

3.5 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A major component of the School-Community Learning Environment Project was to work with the Alberta Regional Learning Consortia to provide all pilot schools with access to professional development in FNMI education. Individual schools identified the following professional development activities:

- Developed In-service program for staff on integrating FNMI perspectives - FNMI cultures, history, world views into the curriculum.
- Provided professional development programs for teachers based on First Nations, Métis and Inuit education and cultural teachings.
- Provided FNMI workshops and training sessions on effective practices for teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit learners.
- Built staff understanding via professional learning community of the needs of FNMI learners and their worldview by drawing on First Nations, Métis and Inuit resources for data (student needs) and best practices (learning strategies).
- Provided FNMI Awareness and Culture workshops to all school staff through the Regional Consortia, the FNMI Services Branch, FNMI Liaison Workers, and Coordinators with the help of local FNMI Elders, Parents and Role Models.
- Staff attended Learning Together for Success Conference for greater understanding and appreciation of FNMI cultures, history and issues.
- Elders and community members were invited to share knowledge and experience with school staff with regard to FNMI culture, history and world views.
- Staff in-services were conducted to help school staff enhance relationships with FNMI parents and communities.
- Utilized the School-Community Learning Environment Project (SCLEP) Toolkit and other Professional Development Resources such as the SCLEP Facilitator Professional Development Resource as a professional development tool.
- Created a publication called "Did You Know" featuring FNMI cultures, history, world views and other pertinent information in 14 editions and distributed it in all school within the jurisdiction.
- Created an FNMI Resource Website button for staff on school website.

Common Elements - Pilot schools provided their staff members with significant professional development opportunities as part of this project. A number of schools were provided with professional development opportunities through the Alberta Regional Learning Consortia. The "School-Community Learning Environment Project Facilitator Professional Development Resource" developed in collaboration with project schools, provided a framework for these professional development programs.

3.6 ADDITIONAL STUDENT SUPPORTS

Pilot schools provided FNMI students with a wide range of individual supports beyond the classroom to assist them in dealing with issues, develop long term goals and improve the students' sense of belonging. Individual schools noted that they:

- Developed FNMI student leadership programs.
- Facilitated career counseling at the junior high level.
- Provided counseling for students re: academics and socialization.
- Increased the transitional support for FNMI students between elementary and junior high, junior high and senior high school.

- Set up mentorship programs for FNMI students.
- Enhanced career listings in the library to include more FNMI resources.

Common Elements – A number of pilot schools reported the development of leadership, mentorship and career education programs to assist FNMI students. Other schools reported increased emphasis on transition planning for their FNMI students.

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